

Remarks for the 93rd Standing Committee meeting
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme
Kelly T. Clements, Deputy High Commissioner
17 June 2025

Mister Chair,
Excellencies,
Colleagues,

A warm welcome to UNHCR's 93rd Standing Committee. It is a privilege to be here with you.

This is a moment like no other. When the familiar world order has given way to uncertainty and increasing fear that conflicts and wars will escalate further. At the same time, funding for humanitarian aid has been slashed. Forcing us to do less with less when global needs are soaring – with 122 million people forced to flee as we reported last week. We have talked about this unprecedented situation in other fora throughout this spring and we continue to ring the alarm bell also in this Standing Committee. At this meeting, our focus is on protection, which Assistant High Commissioner will speak to shortly – and how lack of funding impacts refugee lives. Refugees face a double crisis: the trauma of exile, and the collapse of the support systems on which they rely. It is within this context that we urgently call for more solidarity with people forced to flee. Solidarity – the theme of this year's World Refugee, which we will commemorate on Friday - has never been more needed.

Distinguished delegates,

This brings me to our dire financial situation. The entire aid system is at an inflection point, and UNHCR is one of the hardest hit. As of last month, UNHCR is 22 per cent funded with USD 2.4 billion in estimated funds available against the total needs of a budget of USD 10.6 billion. This includes the EXCOM approved budget and additional needs for Syria and its neighboring countries. We are deeply grateful to donors who have advanced and, in some cases, increased their contributions. It has helped us keep operations running albeit at reduced levels. But time is not on our side. Our projections for this year, show that UNHCR's funding risks slipping back to levels we saw a decade ago – with serious consequences for refugees and their hosts. We have redoubled our resource mobilization efforts, by bringing the voice of operations to key donor capitals, explaining the impact of aid cuts (as you heard in this room in March) to senior decision makers to make those urgent resource commandments quickly. We are increasing substantially funding submissions beyond the global appeal, to support key activities such as prevention and response to sexual violence, and to strengthen asylum systems and resettlement. We will shortly appeal for additional support for the costs of downsizing responsibly our operations and broader transitions, some of which will now lash up with UN80 and Humanitarian Reset reforms, in which we are fully engaged, leading pieces of this important work.

Over the past dramatic weeks and months, we have responded swiftly but carefully to help minimize unintended consequences. After we quickly implemented far-reaching austerity measures focused on administration and management earlier this year, we froze and later cut activities worth USD 600 million while reducing expenditures to manage limited cash available.

As you know, UNHCR uses or implements over 95 per cent of what we receive each year. We do not have reserves to call upon in situations like this. We will come back to you after the current turbulence has somewhat subsided and recommend adjustments to the way we plan, budget and implement to ensure a greater ability to meet future challenges and opportunities.

And now, as many of you were briefed a couple of weeks ago, we have just undergone a rapid and painful downsizing exercise, which will lead to UNHCR globally being 30 per cent smaller. Our Headquarters and Regional Bureaus will become leaner, reducing the number of HQ divisions and entities, and discontinuing the Southern Africa Regional Bureau as of 1 October. We have been forced to close or downsize UNHCR offices around the world – changing our presence in 185 different operational contexts, finding creative ways to deliver, including by embedding our teams within other UN structures. Approximately 3,500 staff positions are identified for discontinuation, and so far, we have had to see hundreds of colleagues supporting us on a temporary basis leave the organization. All this, while aiming to preserve our lifesaving emergency response and a dogged focus on protection and solutions. It is not easy.

Throughout the review process, we have sought the advice of independent bodies, including the Independent Audit and Oversight Committee and Office of Internal Oversight Services. We have built on lessons learned from evaluations and audit recommendations, drawn from strong risk analysis, and consultations with internal and external stakeholders. However, the time and speed imposed on us did not allow for deep discussions and deliberations, which we would have preferred. Through dialogue with sister UN agencies, we have benefited from mutual learning and identified possible efficiencies that could be thoughtfully adapted to UNHCR's specific context. We tried to the extent possible to build on the 9-year transformation, to ensure that the most valuable investments as a result of the Global Compact on Refugees are retained - in partnership, innovation, protection and program delivery, localization, efficiency, data and digital, to name just a few. Here I want to thank all of you for your valuable inputs in this Committee – so important to us – and in bilateral/group discussions at global, regional and country levels. We will continue to count on you as we navigate uncertainty in the face of escalating needs.

Excellencies,

In the context of diminishing resources, we are forced to scale back essential activities and services. We are having to decide not who to help, but who we cannot afford to abandon. You just heard one example, from the Chair about the impossible choices with which our colleagues and partners are faced in Bangladesh, not to mention the hosts.

Throughout this downsizing process, our decisions have been driven by the overarching priority to maintain operations in regions with the most urgent refugee needs. Prioritizing support for the most vulnerable refugees in the most precarious contexts, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. For internally displaced persons, we will focus on protection, especially in emergencies, while in protracted situations, we will gradually transition out, with the hope that other actors can take the lead. In all forced displacement situations, we will strengthen collaboration with the World Bank and sister UN agencies to enhance their engagement in sectors such as education and health, allowing UNHCR to concentrate on lifesaving emergency response, protection, and solutions.

Globally, UNHCR has had to reduce the value of funded partnership agreements by some 40 per cent this year compared to last year. In line with our commitment to advancing localization we have protected our national and local partners to the extent possible to maintain some level of critical protection, lifesaving and emergency activities. However, the situation is exacerbated by the reductions our partners are experiencing from other sources. The impact is brutal.

This crisis is also taking a heavy toll on many of your countries and communities—as well as the refugees you so generously host. Host countries are not just supporting others; they are themselves deeply affected. That is why continued support to them is not only fair, it is essential. And in the last weeks, UNHCR has reported increased tensions in some of the most difficult environments where we operate, as efforts to support and stabilize populations are scaled back or suspended. This includes refugees protesting suspensions of cash aid in Chad and Yemen, to name just a few. Leading to more instability and onward movement for desperate people.

Distinguished delegates,

Amidst this high uncertainty, our critical, lifesaving work continues. And it must continue. We must accelerate our work. We are well placed to do so.

UNHCR has long been committed to delivering in the most effective and efficient way possible. The organization is constantly adapting and changing. Through our major transformation process, we have modernized the organization and brought decision-making closer to the point of delivery. And as we continue to improve processes, systems and policies, we build on these new IT systems – leveraging technology to its fullest possible extent. For UNHCR, delivering better is not only about efficiencies of enabling functions, but about supporting colleagues working on the frontlines, innovating and rethinking the way we do business so more is available to support refugees. UNHCR will soon publish its deliver better roadmap outlining how we monitor and demonstrate value for money. I will address this under agenda item 5 later in the week.

Our dedication to driving efficiencies, innovation and collaboration, is also seen in our active leadership role in the broader UN-wide efficiency agenda. Within the High-Level Committee on Management, UNHCR is at the forefront of designing and exploring practical efficiency measures – from shared logistics and interoperable digital services to joined up finance, planning, assessment, and human resource systems – that support the Humanitarian Reset's ambition to share platforms, quicken the response, and empower country leadership. And as I speak, the High Commissioner is attending the Inter-Agency Standing Committee Principals meeting here in Geneva, championing leaner, more adaptable coordination models, strong protection leadership, and locally led response frameworks. These system-wide processes are not only shaped by UNHCR's operational expertise but are informing our own internal reforms – reinforcing our shift toward streamlined delivery and a renewed focus on protection and solutions in our operations.

We are also working more closely with other UN agencies. For example – and there are many - we have intensified collaboration with IOM and embarked on a joint comprehensive review to find more efficiencies and cost savings in our enabling functions. We also continue to work

together closely in our operational responses, in particular in contexts of mixed movements of refugees and migrants who often travel along the same routes, and are subjected to the same human rights violations, but whose protection needs are different. The Assistant High Commissioner for Protection will address this under what we have referred to as a 'route-based approach' in more detail.

And we continue to push for sustainable responses to forced displacement – approaches that support host communities, and create the conditions for lasting solutions for refugees, including voluntary return where possible. These responses must be nationally led, with refugees included in national systems such as health, education, and social protection. They require close collaboration across development partners, humanitarian agencies, the private sector, and civil society – to strengthen systems and expand access to employment, a key pathway to reduce dependency on aid. You will hear more from the Director of Resilience and Solutions later in this meeting. Evidence from different contexts demonstrates their impact. In Mexico, we have seen that giving refugees and migrants the right to work boosts the economy. Every dollar invested in protecting refugees returns four in tax revenue. This is a powerful reminder that when refugees are included, they don't just rebuild their lives—they help build stronger societies.

Dear colleagues,

Despite the critical work being carried out across our operations, our team's morale is understandably low. The same is true across the humanitarian aid sector. For many, this is not just a financial and professional crisis – it is a deeply deeply personal one. And we had to make painful decisions. We fully recognize the emotional toll this period of uncertainty and change has taken on our colleagues and their families. Many are navigating anxiety, grief, and disruption. We are seeing a rise in the use of our psychosocial support services, and increased engagement with both informal and formal grievance mechanisms. This is a clear signal of the strain felt across the organization—and one we take very seriously.

In response, we are stepping up our engagement with colleagues – expanding communication and support to help them understand their options, manage transitions, and access available resources, including information on learning opportunities, career support, counselling, and reskilling.

In line with our commitment to transparency and accountability, we have maintained our capacity for investigations and management evaluations to respond to allegations of misconduct and improper human resource procedures. At the same time, we are strengthening fraud risk management across the organization to mitigate vulnerabilities during this transition.

Mister Chair,
Distinguished delegates,

These are not easy times. But through shared responsibility, dialogue, and a continued focus on our values, we can navigate this uncertainty together. We remain guided by our mandate to protect people forced to flee and to pursue solutions shaped by their voice and needs. In the face of devastating funding cuts, our priority is clear – to minimize the impact on refugees and

stateless persons. But we cannot do this alone. You all play a crucial role in shaping our response and ensuring that our collective actions reflect both compassion and resolve.

We also urge greater collaboration in the weeks and months ahead– not only with us, but also amongst yourselves as Member States. While it is only natural to turn inward when the world feels unstable, lasting solutions require us to look beyond ourselves and work together. This is the vision in the Global Compact on Refugees, the progress on which we will review later this year.

In this spirit, we call for renewed solidarity with people forced to flee. Solidarity that goes beyond empathy and translates into action. This is a moment to show strengthened commitment to refugees, others forced to flee, and stateless people... after all, what we do together is for them.

Thank you